

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07

L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

NSCE-00 SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 NEAE-00 ACDA-07

OMB-01 SSM-03 IO-13 TRSE-00 /074 W

-----281326Z 008372 /45

O R 281214Z MAR 77

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3462

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 1363

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, MILI, LE, SY

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT-ARMY CRISIS COMES TO A HEAD

1. SUMMARY: NUMEROUS SIGNS POINT TO A CRISIS IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT AND THE HARD-LINE CHAMOUN-FRANGIE-BECHIR GEMAYEL RIGHTISTS, WITH THE MODERATE PHALANGISTS CAUGHT SQUARELY IN THE MIDDLE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN EDGING TOWARDS DISMISSAL OF GENERAL HANNA SAID AS ARMY COMMANDER, AND IT IS WIDELY EXPECTED THAT A DECISION WILL BE TAKEN AT THIS EVENING'S (MARCH 28) CABINET MEETING. END SUMMARY.

2. WILL HANNA SAID BE OUSTED? OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DAYS, THE PRESS HAS BEEN REPORTING IMMINENT MAJOR STEPS TOWARDS REORGANIZATION OF THE LEBANESE ARMY. PRESS HAS REPORTED EXPLICITLY THAT ARMY COMMANDER GENERAL HANNA

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SAID WILL BE REPLACED THROUGH CABINET DECREE-LAW TODAY, MARCH 28. IT UNCLEAR, HOWEVER, EXACTLY WHOM GOVERNMENT WILL PUT IN HIS PLACE IF INDEED IT DOES OUST HIM.

3. CHAMOUN AND FRANGIE. CAMILLE CHAMOUN HAS TALKED DIRECTLY WITH PRESIDENT SARKIS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS OVER THE LAST FEW DAYS, OSTENSIBLY IN HIS ROLE AS CURRENT

"PRESIDENT" OF THE KFUR FRONT "DIRECTORATE." WHILE NOT CRITICIZING THE PRESIDENT DIRECTLY, HE HAS ALLEGEDLY MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE BELIEVES HANNA SAID IS PERFECTLY SUITABLE TO CONTINUE AS ARMY COMMANDER. ACCORDING TO BECHIR GEMAYEL, CHAMOUN TOLD THE PRESIDENT THAT SAID'S REMOVAL WILL BE INTERPRETED AS AN UNACCEPTABLE AFFRONT TO LEBANON'S CHRISTIANS. CHAMOUN REPORTEDLY TOLD THREE OF SARKIS' MINISTERS (DOUMIT, RAPHAEL, AND RIXK), WHO CALLED ON HIM MARCH 25, THAT SAID REPRESENTS LEGALITY AND THAT NO CHRISTIAN ARMY OFFICER WILL RESPECT LEGALITY, EVEN OF THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT, IN THE FUTURE, IF HE IS REMOVED. EX-PRESIDENT FRANGIE HAS BEEN IN CONTACT WITH DEFENSE MINISTER BOUTROS AND REPORTEDLY IS TAKING THE SAME LINE AS CHAMOUN.

4. RUMBLES ON THE RIGHT. WE HAVE EYEWITNESS REPORTS OF UNREST IN ASHRAFIYAH BEGINNING MARCH 27, INCLUDING SHOOTING IN THE AIR BY CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN AND BURNING TIRES IN THE STREETS NEAR PHALANGE HEADQUARTERS IN FURNES CHEBBAK. THE RIGHTIST MILITIA ARE CALLING FOR A GENERAL STRIKE. WE UNDERSTAND AS OF EARLY MARCH 28 THAT STUDENTS ARE COMPLYING, BUT NOT SHOPKEEPERS.

5. INTIMIDATION OF BOUTROS. WE HAVE HEARD TALK THAT HARD-LINE RIGHTISTS WOULD ATTEMPT TO ASSASSINATE FOREIGN/DEFENSE MINISTER BOUTROS IF HE PERSISTED IN HIS EFFORTS TO HAVE SAID REPLACED. ON MARCH 26, ACCORDING TO ARMY SOURCES, BOUTROS IN FACT CALLED ON SAID AND ASKED HIM TO RESIGN. (SAID REPORTEDLY REFUSED.) DURING NIGHT OF MARCH 27-28, AT 0200, CONFIDENTIAL

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A BOMB EXPLODED IN THE ELEVATOR SHAFT ON THE SIXTH FLOOR OF THE APARTMENT HOUSE WHERE BOUTROS LIVES. EXPLOSION CAUSED EXTENSIVE MATERIAL DAMAGES BUT NO INJURIES OR LOSS OF LIFE. THE INTENT, WE SUPPOSE, WAS TO ADD EMPHASIS TO THE THREATS AGAINST HIM.

6. SAID CAUTIOUS--OR RESPONSIBLE. HANNA SAID APPEARS TO BE POSITIONED TO LAND ON HIS FEET, WHATEVER HAPPENS. ON MARCH 24 HE SPOKE TO ASSEMBLED OFFICERS AT YARZE, URGING THEM TO RESPECT THE LEGAL AUTHORITY. WE HAVE HEARD FROM MILITARY SOURCES, THAT, IF HE IS TO BE REMOVED AS ARMY COMMANDER, HE WOULD LIKE TO BECOME LEBANON'S AMBASSADOR TO FRANCE AND THAT BOUTROS HAS AGREED.

7. MODERATE CHRISTIANS WALKING A TIGHTROPE. THE MAIN-STREAM OF THE PHALANGE PARTY, LED BY PIERRE GEMAYEL, AND INCLUDING HIS SON AMINE (BUT OBVIOUSLY NOT BECHIR) AND KARIM BAKRADOUNI, CONTINUES TO SUPPORT SARKIS, WHILE AVOIDING CRITICISM OF THEIR RIGHTIST ALLIES. PIERRE GEMAYEL

MARCH 26 SPOKE OF THE NECESSITY OF AN ARMY WITH "ABSOLUTE ALLEGIANCE TO THE FATHERLAND." IN AN ARTICLE IN "MONDAY MORNING" MARCH 28, PAKRADOUNI, WRITING IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS VISIT LAST WEEK TO DAMASCUS, REITERATES HIS SUPPORT OF "ONE AUTHORITY IN LEBANON...THERE WON'T ANY LONGER BE A STATE WITHIN A STATE, OR MILITIAS, OR ARMIES." HE SAID, "...BOTH SYRIA AND THE KATAEB ARE IN AGREEMENT TO BE IN THE SERVICE OF PRESIDENT SARKIS." HE SPEAKS OF A CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE SYRIAN-PHALANGIST ALLIANCE BY "WARMONGERS."

8. MARCH 28 MAY PROVE TO BE A DECISIVE DAY IN THE EFFORTS OF THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT TO ASSERT ITS RULE OF LEBANON. IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW THE GOVERNMENT COULD POSTPONE ONCE AGAIN ACTION TO REMOVE SAID WITHOUT APPEARING IRREDEEMABLY WEAK. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE HARD-LINING CHRISTIANS COULD ATTEMPT SOMETHING APPROXIMATING A COUP. WE THINK THIS UNLIKELY AND THAT A MORE LIKELY DENOUEMENT WOULD FEATURE
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SOME FACE-SAVING GESTURES, WHICH ARE STILL POSSIBLE. SARKIS COULD, FOR EXAMPLE, DECIDE ON SAID'S REMOVAL DEFINITELY NOW, BUT TO TAKE EFFECT AT A LATER DATE.
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